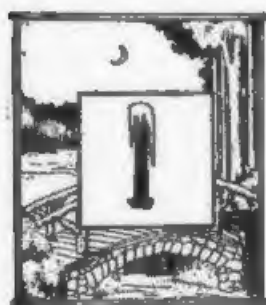


THE TRESPASSER



IDELLE let the reins fall loose on the neck of her horse, and studied the landscape carefully, though with manifest impatience. All about her lay the range land, brown

and far-horized and silent, steeped in the haze of such a still, smoky day as comes sometimes upon the land in late November. Range cattle—bearing, for the most part, her father's brand—loitered lazily over the hills or trailed listlessly down to the coulee bottoms. Far to the east, a high-piled mass of violet and purple shadows hovered between the brown of the range and the coppery blue of the sky, and seemed on the point of fading into nothing at all, they were so vague and unreal; those were the Bear Paws.

She turned and looked behind, sniffed tentatively a moment, and faced to the front again. There was the tang of distant prairie fires in the air—so distant that she gave them no thought whatever. She studied again the low-lying hills and the shallow, yellow-rimmed coulees, drew her forehead into three distinct, straight-up-and-down lines, and tightened the reins suggestively. Tendoy perked his ears inquiringly forward and back, and stepped out leisurely.

Once down the hill, she put him to a lope, following, it would seem, the sense of smell—though of a truth it was not the pleasantest scent to follow. It was the rank, musty, never-forgotten or mistaken odor of sheep. From the direction of the smell, she

judged they were grazing on forbidden ground. Down a certain coulee flowed a broad, shallow creek, and she headed toward it indignantly, guided by her protesting olfactory nerves. Sheep in that coulee and on that creek came near being the unforgivable sin, in her opinion; for the coulee was her father's, and her father was a cattleman. Cattle and sheep do not mix well on the range, as everyone knows.

Far up and down the coulee, on either side the creek, straggled the band, taking solid comfort in the clear water and the thick tangle of grass. The lambs—half grown, they were, round-bodied and with tight-curled wool and an effervescent joy in living—raced up and down the bank and bleated impertinently, with due attention to the grating tremolo in their voices, at their long-suffering mothers.

Idelle clicked her teeth together and galloped toward them, and came near running over the herder, stretched luxuriously on his back in the dim sunshine, with a disreputable slouch hat tilted over his nose and his hands clasped under his head. She pulled up Tendoy and regarded the fellow sternly.

He raised to an elbow, questioned her with his eyes and got up and bowed—all with an unblushing assumption of innocence which made her long to shake him—only, he was so very big.

"Are you the man that herds these sheep?" she asked him in what might be considered a belligerent tone.

"I have that honor."

She took a second look at him. He was dressed like a tramp—or the typical sheep herder; but his speech!

"Then you must know that you are trespassing. We don't allow sheep this side the ridge."

"Then you ought to have your ridge fenced."

"Well, I like your nerve!" she blazed, with very red cheeks.

"Oh, don't mention it!" he returned, deprecatingly, as if she had paid him a compliment.

Idelle hesitated, and in the interval glared at him in a way that should have humbled him much, but which, unfortunately, seemed only to amuse him. She did not quite know how to deal with a herder of this sort; it was not the first time she had ordered sheep out of this coulee, but it was the first time the herder in charge had shown the slightest symptom of facetiousness or defiance. Always before they had gone humbly, without word of protest. Sheep herders knew quite as well as anyone when they were trespassing. Her anger grew under this one's assurance.

"I shall probably mention several things before I'm done," she warned, haughtily.

"Oh, thanks!" he smiled, quite undisturbed.

"I should like to know why you've got your sheep down here in *our* coulee," she began anew.

The man looked at her with a certain pained surprise at her stupidity. "Why, to let them drink. Sheep do need water occasionally, you know."

"Oh, indeed! And who gave you permission to let them drink here?"

"Nobody. I didn't ask."

"I suppose"—ironically—"it never occurred to you that the owner of the land might object. Now that the fact is brought to your notice, you will get your dogs and drive your sheep back where they belong—at once!"

The herder sat down on a rock and regarded his charges with affectionate indulgence. "Oh, let the poor things be! I can't see that they're despoiling your lawn—and they do enjoy this grass."

"Do you mean that you won't go?"

"Good heavens, no! Think of spend-

ing the night in this coulee! But just now it's very nice and comfortable, and—I'm tired."

"I—I'd like to *thrash* you!" She rode a step nearer and looked down at him with impotent rage. That he should defy her so—he, a sheep herder!

He pushed his battered gray hat far back on his head, and regarded her leisurely. "Would you?" He seemed to be turning the matter over in his mind, quite impersonally. "Now, that's odd. Do you know, I haven't the slightest desire to thrash *you*, and you disturbed me just as I was dropping off into a doze. I hate being waked up suddenly, too. I think"—meditatively—"I must have a downright forgiving nature; never suspected it before, though."

Idelle bit her lip; not for worlds would she encourage the fellow by laughing at his foolishness. "Who are you working for?" she demanded, curtly.

"Ed Burgess," he informed her, indifferently, breaking off a dry weed and beginning carefully to split it with his thumb nail. Idelle noticed that his hands were very nice—for a sheep herder's.

"Well, I'm going to report you. Mr. Burgess doesn't uphold his herders in ranging over other people's property, and——"

"You wouldn't deprive a poor man of a job?" He eyed her intently—so intently, in fact, that she preferred not to meet his look.

"It will not be me—if you lose your job it will be your own fault. You ought to go when I tell you."

"But you oughtn't to tell me to go," he argued. "You ought to consider the—the sheep. Would you have me break up that game of tag over there?" He pointed a lazy forefinger. "Look at the innocent little lambs gamboling around their mothers——"

"Fudge! They're every bit as big as their mothers—and, anyway, I hate sheep."

"Well, consider me, then. I've been tramping in the wake of that—er—

blessed bunch of sheep since daylight. If you knew how my legs ache——"

"I don't want to know. I'm not interested in your—your personal feelings," she snapped, turning a bit redder.

"Well, I am. And I feel that I am justified in risking your anger by staying till I rest my—er—personal feelings."

Idelle giggled convulsively, checked herself and immediately became frigidly furious. "Unfortunately, I can't force you to go—as I would if I were a man. Just because I'm a woman, you take advantage. I suppose I'll have to send one of the men over here to order you off and see that you go."

"Oh, I intend to go—after a while. I wouldn't bother, if I were you. I'll probably get fired, anyway, so I won't come many more times——"

"You'll not come at all! You've no right. If you come again, I—I'll tell papa when he comes home. I—I think you're the meanest fellow I ever saw!"

The man sighed lugubriously. "Now, what have I done to deserve that?" he inquired, plaintively, of the hills. "She thinks I'm the meanest fellow she—ever—saw! Me! The meanest——"

"Oh, no doubt you're the wittiest man in Montana—but I hope I may never meet another just like you. Let me advise you—don't bring your nasty, smelly sheep into this coulee again, or——"

"They aren't mine," he denied, hastily. "They belong to Ed——"

"I don't care who they belong to." Idelle could have cried with vexation. "If you're here to-morrow——"

"Thank you; I shall be delighted, I'm sure." The herder stood up and lifted his hat.

"No, you won't—I promise you that!" She struck her horse impulsively and rode back whence she came, at a sharp gallop, with her shoulders well back and with an exceedingly straight spine. This pose, while it spoke for dignity, is not the most comfortable when one is riding swiftly. Just as soon as she felt that she was out of the herder's sight, she relaxed into a more

normal posture, and thought of several scathing remarks which she regretted thinking of too late to be of any use. She felt tempted to ride back and say some of the things, but resisted the impulse, as undignified.

The next day she rode out, firmly resolved to put a stop to the insolence of that particular sheep herder. Just because he happened to be educated, she argued, was no reason why he should calmly ignore the rights of ownership. His education only made his actions the more inexcusable; a man of his stamp had no business to be herding sheep, anyway; why didn't he do something worth while? He must be abominably shiftless and unambitious—his disreputable attire proved that.

When she discerned a moving, gray blotch, with two black dots scurrying around the outside, on the ridge which bounded the forbidden territory, she was furious. That he should dare! Probably he was just idiotic enough to think it smart to go where he had no right, just because it was a woman who had told him to keep off.

She started toward him—it was more than a mile across to the ridge—and then she pulled up and considered. He would only laugh at her, just as he had done the day before, and she could do nothing but lose her temper, and feel perfectly ridiculous. He would treat her just as if she were an impertinent child, to be laughed at and afterward ignored.

If he had kept away after that first offense, she might forgive his insolence; but to come back—he certainly must be coming back, or he would not have topped the ridge. He was planning to drift the sheep slowly down to the coulee, and camp by the creek at noon. And if she permitted that she would never have a shred of self-respect left. There was only one course to take, and that was to deal with the fellow as he deserved.

She wheeled and galloped back to the house after Kid Brandt, who was six feet and two inches tall, and had the muscle—and the will—to back every inch of his height. The herder was

big, and looked athletic—but Kid was bigger; and if there was anything Kid hated, it was a sheep herder. She need only tell him that a band of sheep were watering in Nine Mile water gap, and Kid would do the rest.

Kid saddled without words or waste of time, and they rode back together. Idelle did not attempt any self-justification about her going along; she wanted to go, and she went; that was sufficient. The sheep had not moved perceptibly nearer, but there they were on the ridge, within half a mile of the coulee. Kid led the way across and Idelle followed silently.

"They ain't on our land yet," Kid remarked, when they were climbing the ridge. "But they're grazing close to the dead line, all right enough—and if it's as you say, they've got to take a sneak down the other side."

"It's the same bunch and the same herder," Idelle assured him. "When I told him to go yesterday, he just laughed at me and wouldn't move. You'd think he owned the earth."

"He'll move this time," Kid promised, darkly. "And I don't guess he'll laugh his ribs sore over it, neither."

Idelle smiled approval, and Kid, who was not impervious to the smiles of a pretty girl, drew down his brows and made straight for the herder, who sat at ease upon a sunken boulder, with his back turned squarely toward them. He was playing industriously upon what evidently was a jew's-harp, and he seemed quite absorbed in the sounds he was making.

"Here, you, what yuh doing with your sheep over here?" greeted Kid, truculently.

The herder jumped, slid the jew's-harp shamefacedly into his pocket and turned a deprecatory face toward them. "Ay ben let dem sheeps eat do grass," he drawled, grinning as only a bashful Swede can grin, when nature has been overgenerous in bestowing a mouth upon him.

Idelle gasped and glanced hastily at Kid; but that gentleman had a mind only for the business in hand.

"You been watering your sheep down

in that coulee, and you wouldn't get out yesterday when this young lady warned you off. Ain't yuh got neither manners nor sense? The best thing you can do is take a sneak out uh here."

The herder's grin became strained and unmirthful. "Ay don'd ben take no sneaks. Ay don'd ben votter no sheeps in no coul-ee. Ay ben seek in mine sto-mack; Ay don'd ben vork von veek ago. Ay tank yo ess fool."

Kid grew darkly red and swung beligerently down from his horse. "I wish you'd ride on a ways, Miss Nevin," he said. "As I understand this Scandinoovian, he's just called me a name I don't feel no call to stand for. I'm going to lick the everlasting day-lights out uh him."

"Ay don'd tank so, yet," drawled he of the grin. "Ay ben seek in mine sto-mack; Ay tank Ay can leek yo', any-vay."

"Oh, yuh do, eh?" Kid threw off his coat with ominous calm.

"I wouldn't make trouble, Kid," interrupted Idelle, uneasily. "It—it isn't the same fellow. I—I made a mistake."

"Yuh did, eh?" Kid eyed her disapprovingly. "Looks to me like yuh might a discovered your mistake a little sooner, then." He put on his coat with an injured air that seemed to Idelle a direct insult.

She jerked Tendoy into action, and, without a word or a backward look, rode away up the ridge, scattering the stragglers of the band as she galloped past.

Kid got onto his horse sulkily, glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Idelle was out of hearing, advised the herder tersely to depart at once for that unhallowed place where is never any snow, and thundered back down the ridge and across the coulee toward home, feeling himself the butt of a particularly idiotic practical joke, and searching his conscience for some reason why Idelle should, as he put it mentally, have it in for him.

The herder settled back upon the rock, grunted his disgust at the whole

unjust proceeding, and went back to the jew's-harp for solace.

Idelle was leading her horse down a particularly steep place in the coulee's rim, and her horse was dragging back on the reins to show his dislike of steep places, and of being led, as if he didn't know where he ought to go himself. Idelle was not in a sweet mood at that moment. When her goundam antagonist rose suddenly up from nowhere and confronted her smilingly, she gave him a look that was positively murderous.

"Good-morning," he began, tentatively and cheerfully.

"Have you used soap?" mimicked Idelle, viciously, and tugged impatiently at Tendoy, who showed a strong inclination to sit down.

"You see I got out of the coulee," he went on, imperturbably.

She neglected to answer him.

"I also got fired."

She turned on him with eyes that were angry. "I suppose you think I'm to blame," she accused him. "I wish I were."

"However, you're not," he said, easily. "I was only a makeshift; the regular herder was sick——"

"I know—in his sto-mack." Idelle permitted her eyes to smile, though her lips disdained to relent.

"You've seen him, then." He laughed. "He knows better than to go into your coulee with his sheep—but I sinned through ignorance. Now that I'm out of a job, and consequently harmless, you'll forgive me, maybe."

Idelle regarded him attentively. "It wasn't the mere act of trespassing," she reminded him. "It was your—manner. You—you were horribly disagreeable." Idelle felt that she was giving ground shamelessly, but, somehow, his eyes were very nice, and——

"I was dead lonesome," he asserted, boldly, "and had to keep up the argument somehow or you'd have ridden on. I should even have let you thrash me, if necessary, to keep you a little longer."

"You were asleep," she retorted, and her lips abetted her eyes in their smil-

ing. "You hated being waked up suddenly; you said so."

"Did I?" He appeared quite indifferent to his former remarks. "I said a whole lot of things, I believe. It was the effect of the sheep; they make one silly—you know that yourself. If I hadn't got fired——"

"I'm sorry for that," she told him, "though you don't deserve it. I think papa could give you work—but not at sheep herding—if you want a job. He's looking for a man to take charge of a winter camp, about fifteen miles from here." She felt very magnanimous, indeed, in telling him this.

He looked grateful, and a bit amused, though she could not see why he should. "I'd like to hire out to your father, but I don't see how I can. You see, I've got another job waiting for me, up in Great Falls. I've got to go to-morrow, or lose it. I think I'd better hang onto that, for it's steady. Thank you, all the same."

"It's nothing," she said, still feeling magnanimous; she would have died rather than own that she also felt a bit disappointed. "I would advise you to take the steady job, by all means. I have lots of friends in the Falls—I'm to spend the holidays there. You'll like it better than herding sheep."

"I believe you're right, Miss—do you know, I've the most remarkable desire to know your name?"

Idelle bethought her of the conventions, and got upon her pedestal. "We're not likely ever to meet again," she rebuffed him. "I can't see the use of introducing ourselves. I'm the girl that ordered you off our land, and—you're the sheep herder that refused to go." She felt virtuous now, as well as magnanimous; taken together, she felt very well satisfied with herself.

"All right, then"—resignedly. "I was going to tell you my name, but I won't now. I suspect you're rather curious to know—but I positively refuse to tell you. And, anyway, I know you're Idelle Nevin; I found out last night."

"I hope it did you a lot of good," flared Idelle, angrily, and pulled sav-

agely at Tendoy, so that, taken unawares, he took several steps without further urging. The man followed.

"Of course it did," he argued, genially. "I wanted to know, and, naturally, I took measures to learn. There is always a distinct satisfaction in learning——"

"You are at liberty to go on learning, if it pleases you," snapped Idelle, and got into the saddle before he could get near enough to help her. "Perhaps in time you may even learn to mind your own affairs." With that she was gone almost out of hearing, and she never once looked back.

Idelle was sitting at the far end of the balcony in Luther's Hall, getting back her composure after twenty minutes of watching the Indian girls, champions of many States, show the crack team of a neighboring town how basketball may be played—by champions. Her palms tingled with much clapping, and her blood was a-jump with the whirlwind play of Fort Shaw. All around her sounded the babel of excited approval; for Great Falls is inordinately proud of the champions, even though Fort Shaw lies several miles to the west.

"That was great, wasn't it?" inquired a familiar voice at her elbow.

Idelle turned quickly; since she never could hold a grudge, the owner of the voice got a welcoming smile for greeting. Her cousin Bob nodded, said: "Hello, Don!" and promptly excused himself.

The trespasser slid as promptly into Bob's chair. "Yes, that was almost as exciting as herding sheep," he added, banteringly.

"Or dealing with lawless herders," supplemented Idelle. Then: "You don't look much like a sheep herder tonight. I don't believe you ever were one—really." Somehow, she did not feel the least surprise at seeing him here, and she felt very well acquainted, for some unaccountable reason.

"Miss Nevin," he said, solemnly, "I've been carrying a guilty secret in my

breast for more than a month; five weeks, to be exact—five weeks yesterday, was when I saw you last. I'm going to confess. I'm an impostor, Miss Nevin. I never herded sheep but that one day, and that was on a bet. Ed Burgess—I was there for a short visit—bet that I couldn't take the band out and herd them all day without losing some or getting lost myself. I won, but it was a close shave. And that isn't the worst, either. When you ordered me to leave the coulee, I didn't go—because I hated to tackle ordering those dogs around, before a lady. You see, I didn't speak their language, and they didn't seem to understand mine; to get anything out of them required much English that a lady should never be obliged to listen to—and I can't swear fluently in any other language. I didn't drive those sheep into your coulee—they just went, and I tagged along behind, making a bluff at being master of the situation. Toward night the dogs started them home—and I also tagged obediently along behind, still making a bluff at being master of the situation. I've thought, since, that it was a sin to take Ed's money."

"Why didn't you tell me—then?" she asked, as severely as she might.

"Oh, say! You wouldn't expect a man to tell a strange young woman that he didn't know enough even to herd sheep?" he protested. "It looks so simple; but take my word, and don't ever tackle it, Miss Nevin; that was the hardest day I ever put in—except when you——"

"And how about the job you said you had here?" she asked, hastily.

"My job? Oh, yes; why, I've not been fired yet. And I can make a living at it. I think"—wistfully—"I could even support a wife comfortably."

"Wives are a very expensive luxury," she reminded him, demurely. "They say it's cheaper to support an automobile, even."

"I'd like to try supporting a wife," he persisted, and there was that in his eyes which made Idelle's cheeks feel hot. "Where are you staying?" he asked, after a second or two. "I've

hunted the town over to find you—and it isn't such a big town, either. But I couldn't seem to find anyone that knew you—till to-night."

"You evidently know Cousin Bob," she said. "I've only been in town three days; I'm staying with them—Bob's folks, up on Third Avenue."

"I'm going to call to-morrow morning," he announced, decisively. "I hope you're an early riser. Are you? Would ten o'clock——"

"How ridiculous!" she laughed. "I should think you'd want to be introduced, at least, before you talk about calling."

For answer he turned and beckoned to Bob, hovering ten feet away, eyeing his chair. Bob came at once.

"Will you introduce me to your cousin?" asked the trespasser.

"Aw, what're you giving me?" sparred Bob, scenting a trick. But the eyes of the man held him compellingly. "Oh, well, then; Idelle, this is Don Lochray, the rising young lawyer that's skinning all the rest of 'em blind, and thinks he'll be a judge some sweet day,

and that owns the biggest, reddest, noisiest automobile in town, and came mighty near running over me twice, and has got the biggest, swellest, lonesomest house on the North Side, and wants——"

"That'll do, young man," interrupted the introduced, sternly. "You go and find yourself a seat somewhere—or stand up. Miss Nevin doesn't need you."

"That's gratitude—I don't think," muttered the irate Bob, and took himself off.

"Now, may I call in the morning?" whispered Don Lochray.

"Fort Shaw! Fort Shaw!" yelled the crowd, as a shrill whistle cut through the clamor, and the Indians started off with a basket in the first half minute.

"Yes—if the Indians win," said Idelle, over her shoulder, and turned resolutely to the game.

"Fort Shaw! Fort Shaw!" yelled Don, tempestuously, as the ball dropped neatly a second time into the basket of the Indians' opponents. "Will nine o'clock be too early?"

